

twice by the Kremlin, returned to Russia last year to continue the peaceful struggle for a more democratic nation and an end to the disastrous war in Ukraine. I will never forget that he came to talk to me just before he returned to Russia and reflected on his determination and optimism for a better future for Russia. Tragically, he was arrested shortly after arriving in Moscow on the laughable charge of criticizing Mr. Putin's war.

Kara-Murza, Alexei Navalny, and so many other Russians who are courageously pursuing a better future for their country deserve our support, and they deserve to be released from Putin's disgraceful gulags.

I would also like to take a moment to mention another brave person. This gentleman, Oswaldo Paya, a brave Cuban, died under suspicious circumstances 11 years ago. Oswaldo Paya had spent years advocating for peaceful, democratic change in Cuba, including submitting thousands of signatures calling for greater political freedoms using a process allowed by the Cuban Constitution itself. Not only did the Castro regime cowardly ignore these modest requests, but it then changed the constitutional provision that allowed for this kind of political input.

After years of harassment and threats, in July 2012, Oswaldo Paya's car was run off the road by a government vehicle, leading to his death. The Cuban Government has never provided a credible accounting of the incident or charged anyone with his death. So, this week, Senators RUBIO, KAINE, CASSIDY, MENENDEZ, CRUZ, CARDIN, WARNER, and I are again calling on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to complete this investigation. I hope the Commission finally acts to bring light to Paya's case and to help deter acts of aggression like this in the future.

RAIL SAFETY

Mr. President, the residents of East Palestine, OH, were still desperate for answers about the toxic derailment of the Norfolk Southern train in their town a month ago when a second Norfolk Southern train derailed in Springfield, OH, this past weekend. This morning, we learned of even another accident involving Norfolk Southern. A railroad employee was killed early this morning when a Norfolk Southern train collided with a dump truck in Cleveland, OH.

These three rail accidents in just 1 month—one of them a catastrophic derailment—have sent a grave and blaring signal that we need to do more to protect American communities from hazardous freight rail shipments. The need for greater rail safety is urgent, especially in my State of Illinois. Chicago, IL, is the busiest rail hub in the United States. About a quarter of all freight rail traffic in our Nation passes through the Chicago area every year.

If we ignore the warnings from East Palestine and Springfield, OH, it is only a matter of time until the next deadly derailment. In East Palestine,

the government has responded quickly. Federal Agencies were on the ground within hours and are still there today. President Biden has instructed workers from Federal Agencies to even go door to door, checking on the residents in the area to see who may need medical attention as a result of exposure to toxic chemicals.

These are the right steps to take, but we also need to do more to prevent train derailments and accidents in the first place so that more communities don't find themselves facing the same dangers and uncertainty as East Palestine.

Freight rail traffic has increased in recent decades, and it continues to grow. At the same time, freight companies have moved to larger and longer trains to increase profits. But Federal regulations have not kept pace with the changing rail industry. That is the problem.

Listen to these figures, which tell the story. In 2001, the profit margin of the leading freight carriers was 15 percent. Today, the profit margin of those same rail carriers is 41 percent—from 15 to 41 percent. While derailments are down overall since the 1970s, the number of train accidents per mile has actually increased. In addition, over the last 7 years, the damage from derailments has grown, particularly from trains carrying hazardous chemicals.

Instead of investing adequately in safety and their workers, freight rail companies have cut staff dramatically and fought to dismantle safety regulations. Those efforts paid off under the previous President, when rail industry regulators dramatically loosened a number of safety rules. The result is greater danger, more congestion, and blocked rail crossings in communities across America.

The disaster in East Palestine appears finally to have produced a bipartisan consensus that change is needed—and it is. My colleagues from Ohio, Senators BROWN and VANCE, have introduced a bipartisan bill that will make several important, commonsense changes and force freight railroads to improve the safety of their operations. I support these efforts and hope the Senate will pass the bill soon.

While the exact causes of the recent Ohio derailments have not yet been determined, inspectors for the national Surface Transportation Board found that a wheel bearing on the derailed Norfolk Southern train in East Palestine heated to more than 250 degrees above average—250 degrees—causing the plastic pellets it was carrying to catch fire.

The bipartisan bill from Senators BROWN and VANCE will increase how frequently the temperature of wheel bearings must be checked. It also would require additional safety procedures for trains carrying these deadly and dangerous materials. This includes rules for the length of trains and their weight, increased inspections, and a requirement that trains hauling haz-

ardous materials have two trained crew members on board instead of just one. Finally, the Brown-Vance bill would provide funding for hazmat training for first responders, and it would invest in both rail research and the development of new tank car safety features. These are important safety steps that will protect rail workers and the communities through which these trains pass.

This past December, Congress approved a labor agreement that gives rail workers the largest wage increase in 50 years, but most of the railroads balked at providing their workers with even 1 day of paid sick leave per year so that they can take care of themselves and their families.

For too long, railroads have short-changed their workers and possibly endangered American communities, maximizing their corporate profits. It is time for change.

Working for railroads is a tradition in my family. I grew up in East St. Louis, IL. Both of my parents worked for the New York Central Railroad. My two brothers and I also worked for the same railroad. I know from personal experience that many railroad jobs are physically demanding and can be dangerous. Lucky for me, the only scar I have from working on the railroad is a minor one, but others have been injured in more grievous ways.

We can't take all the risks out of rail transport, but we must reduce unnecessary risk. The bipartisan Brown-Vance bill strikes the right balance. We should pass it without delay.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). The Republican whip.

IMMIGRATION

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, at the end of last week, I joined several of my Republican colleagues to travel down to our southern border. It was my second visit to the border during the Biden administration—my third overall. My first during the Biden administration was almost exactly 2 years ago, after border numbers started to soar in the wake of the President taking office.

I would have to say unfortunately little has changed since my last visit. Thanks to the fact that President Biden spent the first 2 years of his Presidency refusing to even acknowledge this crisis, much less actually address it, we are still facing a disastrous situation at our southern border.

I talked to Border Patrol agents who have spent 2 years dealing with record-breaking numbers of illegal immigrants and are still looking for support from the Biden administration that never seems to come. Again and again, Border Patrol agents told me that not only do they not feel supported by the Biden administration, but they feel like the Biden administration has actually impeded their ability to do their jobs. "Just let us enforce the law," one agent told me. It is something that was echoed by other law enforcement officers that we spoke to. To give you just